

The problem of long-term development of the repertory theatre in Russia continues to be quite pressing and is in the focus of debates in the media, at conferences and in the backstage circles. The central issue is what the Russian theatre is at the moment and what it should become in the future. What are the objectives of the state policy for the arts and how is theatre going to cope with the hardships resulting from the present-day economic crisis?

Only half-year ago the prognoses were quite optimistic. Despite the attempts to impel theatre to operate “off-line”, one had the impression that theatre was making spectacular progress and the number of companies was growing steadily. In the current economic context the debates that used to be conducted around the idea of contract-based terms of employment for the actors seem to be a mild rehearsal of the crisis, and the squabble around the budget money – an insignificant family row.

Pavel Rudnev’s article was carried by the *Novy Mir* magazine before the crisis. The article by Grigori Zaslavsky, and an interview with Sergei Hudyakov came out in print after the crisis had already broken out.

PAVEL RUDNEV

RE-ENGINEERING BUSINESS PROCEDURES IN THEATRE

Novy Mir, No. 3, 2008

Our society ridded itself of the inferiority complex and at the same time the Russian theatre lost the sense of cultural distinctiveness and found itself in the situation of the most ruthless competition. Today we can see a broad variety of other theatres and envy has become a normal reaction to performances of touring Western big-timers. Meanwhile the Russian national theatre “team” is basically ignored by compilers of the top-lists of international theatre festivals. What is wrong with us and why? What can we offer that the Western theatre doesn’t have? What happened to the internationally renowned commodity called “psychological theatre”? And is it really necessary to cling to this theatrical style no matter what it costs? Where is the once famous Russian avant-garde? Why is the renewal of our theatre system so slow and ineffective? Where are the forces capable of creating real headliners? What needs to be done to provide the necessary resources for effective theatre development and for ensur-

ing true freedom of creation? How to cultivate the kind of audience that not only likes avant-garde but is ready to pay for it? How can the authorities be convinced to revise their cultural policy?

Having had the opportunity to observe the developments in theatre both from within and without, the author of this article has to admit that the problem lies not in the poor aesthetic quality of theatre, physical extinction of talents or the troubled times, but essentially in incompetent management and ineffective cultural policy of the state.

In terms of self-appraisal theatre is an essentially “masochistic” institution. People who make theatre are permanently discontented with it. And those who take a more serious look at the problem reason that gripped by the crisis is not theatre as such but essentially the so called “repertory theatre”. It is the crisis of the system that took shape long before the

emergence of the USSR, and flourished under Stalin's regime as the only workable form of entrepreneurship: a single troupe is managed by single artistic will and performs various plays two or three times every month.

Today the repertory theatre has another distinctive aspect: it is the state theatre, i.e. the theatre subsidized by the state. This model was not all that bad but for some reason it fell apart with the collapse of the Soviet empire.

The values of the repertory theatre were called into question under the impact of various factors. All the restrictions regarding the evolution of the forms of theatre have been lifted. Theatre has been increasingly falling under the influence of various international festivals. The Western experiences have been becoming increasingly widespread. Drama theatres have been by and large borrowing the technologies employed in musicals... It turned out that the repertory theatre was an inalienable ingredient of the planned economy, under which the state covers the minimum needs of theatre but has no effect upon the aesthetic quality of the product it produces. The repertory theatre has been increasingly ignoring opportunities of creating "theatre as home" or "theatre as family", which presupposes creative concentration and clear-cut repertoire policy. In the meantime this theatre has been ignoring its own obvious shortcomings: aloofness, sluggishness, inflexibility, the dependency complex and, worst of all, the lifetime status of artistic directors, directors and actors. Meanwhile the cultural policy and the system of subsidizing theatres seem to be oriented predominantly, if not exclusively, on financing repertory companies, whereas all other forms of management are ignored. In case of the repertory theatre the state finances not so much the art as the staff list. Meanwhile, the quality of work becomes quite irrelevant. In this case subsidy becomes nothing more than a lifelong social allowance. It could all be fine if the repertory theatre was not blocking the way for hundreds of young artists who need a stage to express themselves. The worst off are those in the provinces where, in contrast with Moscow or St. Petersburg, private sponsorship doesn't exist and theatre's dependence on state support becomes the problem of physical survival.

It is becoming increasingly clear that topicality, inspiration and effectiveness are nowadays the prerogative of the companies that have achieved independence on state support and reformed or even broken down the repertory system. On the contrary the repertory theatre today stands out for sluggishness and lack of receptivity to the rhythms of the modern times.

At his press-conference the well-known French director Matthias Langhoff said that "the crisis of theatre always reflects the crisis of the society". The crisis of the repertory theatre reflects the radical changes in the psychology of modern man. He is least disposed to be loyal to one particular structure and serve it dozens of years. The modern man is mobile and is inclined to seek various different areas where he could apply his talents. These changes are reflected in the scaling up migration of directors and actors. Young people increasingly express aversion for the notion of company management, exercised by artistic director, and the "serfdom" of actors in a repertory theatre. The crisis of the repertory theatre is also the crisis large stages and monumental theatrical forms. Public prefers to face the actor on a small stage rather than watching him through opera glasses from a box. The present-day theatre fashions call for more intimate actor/audience relationships, partly because people have developed a distrust for the events that presuppose the gathering of large masses. It is virtually impossible nowadays to achieve the effect of a single impulse driving a crowd. Individualist sensibilities seem to be prevalent now and one is no longer stirred by being part of a crowd of many thousands.

Today theatre needs re-engineering of business procedures. The survival of small independent troupes directly depends upon their ability to act quickly and with maximum effect. It also depends on the quality of their work and naturally on the box-office showings so they literally have to "rock-and-roll" like mad. Meanwhile state-subsidized theatres, relying predominantly on state financing are by majority self-satisfied and sluggish and categorically and aggressively reject the reforms and refuse to accept the modern rules of the game. The repertory theatre responds to modernity only when the attempts are made to carry out at least minor reforms of its

structure. And such companies are not as few and far between as one might think. These reformed and restructured troupes provide convincing evidence to the effect that with competent management the repertory theatre can and should survive. The solution is quite simple. The managerial personnel and artistic directors should be employed on contract-based terms (presuming that these contracts can either be extended or scrapped). The world theatre knows no other methods of raising efficiency. Even recognized geniuses in this world have to time and again confirm their rank. The lifelong right to the throne doesn't exist anymore.

This is the question to be addressed to those who shape the cultural policy of Russia. At the moment the state subsidizes only repertory companies. In economics this would be tantamount to supporting corporations and pay no heed to small businesses and private initiative.

In this situation non-traditional experimental theatre is left without any effective support. This theatre can exist only as an appendix to

a big repertory company: in order to produce something that would claim to be experimental on the "small stage" the main stage must present something the crowd would be willing to pay for.

Perhaps such are the ruthless laws of capitalism. But it is unfair that the state leaves the avant-garde theatre where the seeds of the new art are ripening to face these laws alone.

The repertory theatre's monopolized right to state subsidies burns down all other forms of theatre management and impedes progress. The Russian theatre lacks mobility. It is a heavy and sluggish structure, "a slow deployment force". It is sitting in the trench and it will take quite an effort to make it get out of there. It is akin to a thick literary magazine with a portfolio chock-full for two years ahead in total ignorance of the state of the market.

Modern theatre in Russia is faced with acute demographic problem. If no vacancies are open for new artists, there will be one more lost generation in Russia.

GRIGORI ZASLAVSKY CULTURE DEPENDS ON OIL: BLIND EYE APPLIED TO CRISIS IN CULTURE

Nezavisimaya Gazeta, November 18, 2008

The word "crisis" is still a taboo in Russia. Banks are notifying clients that their cards are stopped as result of cash deficit, but there is still no crisis. Ten years ago poet Igor Irtenev wrote on a similar occasion: "We're fucked but we're not in no crisis".

On the one hand the Ministry of Culture admits that adequate financing of culture needs that oil prices don't drop below \$60 a barrel. In the meantime the same officials acknowledge that in 2009 the financing of culture

may be cut down. A high-ranking official of the Ministry of Culture whom I asked about such a possibility said: "At the moment such speculations are quite groundless. August turned out to be rather hard as a result of the crisis in Southern Ossetia, but at the same time the budget was increased considerably". Chairman of the State Duma's Committee for Culture asserts that there is nothing to worry about, at least in the coming year when the cultural programs budget will expectedly go up 40%. Well, I wish... There are assertions

and declarations, allocations and fund-raising efforts... But there are also rumors that produce quite a depressing effect on all sorts of “budget-addicted” practitioners in the arts.

The music community expresses concern that as a result of the financial crisis there will be shortage of grants that a few years ago were generously allocated to the best orchestras and theatres. It is certainly not a good idea to economize on grants. A good idea would be to carry out inspections of the grant-receiving companies to check how the allocated money is being expended, but the same aforementioned high-ranking official says that such inspections have always been carried out on a regular basis. “It is a very serious problem. The Chamber of Accounts has already inspected the leading companies. There shouldn’t be less money since the Ministry of Finances allocates grants for the entire budget period. The budget has been worked out by the government and endorsed by the State

Duma. I don’t believe that the government will happen to be so short of funds that it will fail to meet its budget commitments”.

In a word, everything’s fine. Officially, there is nothing to worry about. In private conversations officials in the regions say that there will be less money. But how much less? Nobody knows. What seems to be known is when the crisis will strike. In the state institutions of culture the crisis will be felt in about six months.

So there are reasons for concerns. The artistic director of one of the theatres has already been warned that the next year financing will be cut by about 10%. Certainly 10 % is not a big deal. But everybody understands that the distance between 10% and 20% and event beyond that is very short. It is really hard to believe that in the situation of massive layoffs and cutbacks culture will stay unaffected or will even get better off.

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHIEF OF MOSCOW’S DEPARTMENT FOR CULTURE SERGEI HUDYAKOV

Marina Starush, Kultura, #45

Q: What is the policy of Moscow’s Department for Culture?

A: Our cultural policy is based on three major principles: preservation of cultural heritage, support for the freedom of creation and of creative initiatives in the sphere of culture, development of the infrastructure of cultural facilities in Moscow.

Q: Moscow is unparalleled in Russia in terms of the number of theatres. In fact nobody can say exactly how many theatres there are in the capital. But does Moscow need all of them, especially considering that not all of them have anything to do with genuine art?

A: This year we have for the first time introduced contract-based relationships with concert organizations. These contracts also include specific standards that must be met by those who expect financing from the Moscow City budget. On the other hand one must keep in mind that the art always presuppose a search for new forms and meanings that are not at once accepted by broad public. Quite often this search results from the change of generations and therefore need special support.

Our project “The Open Stage” is aimed to develop a system of grants that are issued for specific projects, initiated by young artists. We also monitor the progress made by the recipients of the grants.

However, it is rather hard to carry these ideas into effect in the absence of the sufficient number of scenic venues. And quite often we cannot ensure adequate distribution for quite a few splendid productions that were made with our support. This a very serious organizational problem, but we are working on it.

Q: And finally a question I would not like to ask, but this has already been mentioned in the media – budget cuts; we all know that the arts are usually the first to suffer, but what are your professional expectations: will funds destined to the arts and culture be reduced in any way?

A: I can't say that we are cool and none of this concerns us. Surely we are aware of the government's actions and declarations you have just mentioned. And we have no illusions about chances that the world economy may give us more surprises. At least no one has said that the crisis is over and there is nothing to worry about. However the Mayor has stated more than once that the city administration will do its best to minimize the effects of the crisis on Moscow.

Maybe some of the programs will be slightly protracted, some projects will be finished later than we originally planned. Again, our task is to minimize these delays, or better, make them imperceptible.

In fact, I concede that if the crisis doesn't scale up dramatically it will not affect culture at all. I'm saying this quite frankly. Everything that used to be defined as "socially protected budget articles", like wages, maintenance and safety of buildings, security, etc. will be carried out in full. This is guaranteed by the Moscow Government's position on this matter.